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FM AMEMBASSY BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3541
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC CONFERENCE COLLECTIVE
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000488

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/26/2016
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SUBJECT: LOW-KEY BRUNEIAN REACTION TO PAPAL COMMENTS ON
ISLAM

REF: BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 110

Classified By: Ambassador Emil Skodon, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (SBU) Bruneian reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg comments regarding Islam has been moderate and low-key. Unlike the furor regarding cartoons demeaning to the Prophet Muhammad earlier this year (reftel), this time around there have been no statements of condemnation from the government or political parties, nor has the issue figured prominently in our private discussions with local contacts.

¶2. (C) The Government of Brunei (GOB) has deliberately avoided fanning the controversy. Foreign Minister II Pehin Lim Jock Seng told Ambassador and DCM that he discussed a possible GOB reaction with Sultan Bolkiah immediately after the Regensburg speech was first reported, but while Brunei's monarch regretted Benedict's choice of words he decided that the GOB should not issue any statement. Ambassador later asked Ministry of Religious Affairs Permanent Secretary Dato Haji Abdul Rahman if the controversy would be addressed during Friday sermons at Bruneian mosques (the Ministry approves the content of all such sermons in advance and frequently drafts them itself). Abdul Rahman replied that sermon topics for the next few weeks were already planned and there was no intention to comment on the Pope's remarks, one reason being that the Ministry had not yet received the full text of Benedict's speech and did not wish to formulate a reaction on the basis of second-hand reports.

¶3. (U) Media coverage has been characterized by straightforward reporting drawn from international news agencies. One exception is the Brunei Times daily, which has been trying to carve out a niche as Brunei's "serious" daily newspaper. On September 19 it ran an article under the headline "Brunei Imams Accept Pope's Apology" based on interviews of two imams at the Hassanil Bolkiah Mosque in the capital. In fact, the imams stopped short of fully recognizing the Pope's regret, and instead were quoted as saying they "hope it was a sincere apology" and that the Pope "must recognize his mistake and apologise with sincerity."

¶4. (U) The Brunei Times editorialized that the Islamic world's anger about the Pope's comments derives from a post-9/11 sense among Muslims that "their faith is under attack," and that the challenge for Muslims was "to prove that Islam and Muslims are not what is commonly portrayed -- violent, intolerant, divisive, and regressive," but rather to "act sensibly to prove that Islam is a religion of peace, and that any provocation will not taint its sanctity." A subsequent edition printed an op-ed by one of the paper's editors, who pointed out that Christians responded to perceived insults to their faith in "The Da Vinci Code" with forums and documentaries instead of violence and demonstrations. He argued that "If Muslims continue reacting with similar forceful fervour to every controversy about

Islam, they may possibly damage the image of the faith more than the controversy itself could."

15. (C) Comment: We do not discount the possibility that the GOB might feel the need to address the Holy Father's comments at some point in the future, particularly if the controversy heats up and fuels growing public concern during the just-begun fasting month of Ramadan, when the sense of faith is particularly acute among Bruneian Muslims. For now, however, it appears that the GOB is content to let the issue die down, and if it reacts at all it will be to stress the need for Muslims to respond with reasoned dialogue instead of with violence. End Comment.
SKODON